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ABSTRACT

This presentation paper reviews concerns regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular education classrooms. Misunderstandings of the student placement requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act are discussed, as are misunderstandings regarding the difference between mainstreaming and inclusion. The lack of preparation of regular teachers for working on a regular basis with children who need special help and the problems such teachers have in managing students who exhibit disruptive behavior are described. Topics also discussed include: (1) the pressure educators may experience from program administrators to make inclusive placements to help schools with the financial cost of programs for students with disabilities; and (2) the lack of communication between regular education teachers and special education teachers. The report closes with a summary of the advantages and disadvantages of inclusion for students with disabilities, regular students, school districts, special education teachers, regular education teachers, and parents of students with and without disabilities. (CR)

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INCLUSION:

WHO WINS? WHO LOSES?

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INCLUSION: WHO WINS? WHO LOSES?

"Inclusion" of special education students in "regular" classrooms on a full-time basis has been a hot topic in public schools for several years. Is the concept and the resulting programs that are being implemented in schools productive for students? Are there "winners" and "losers" in such implementation? The commentary is based on a review of recent literature and personal observations.

A review of literature revealed strong support for the concept of inclusion by numerous writers (McGregor, 1993; Roach, Ascroft & Stamp, 1995; Van Dyke, Stallings, & Colley, 1995). Though not presently fashionable, there were writers who expressed strong reservations about both the concept and the implementation of such programs by others (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Maloney, 1994; Murphy, 1994; LoVette, 1994). Even though a number of school districts were reporting "successful" inclusion programs, it appeared that there was great diversity in how such programs were implemented, and the philosophies that guided such implementations. The reception that was given to inclusion programs by many teachers and administrators appeared to be warm while others had been reluctant to fully include "special" students and had openly opposed inclusion efforts, especially as implemented in some situations.

It appears that inclusion efforts may be taking place, in some instances, for the wrong reasons. There appears to be a lack of understanding of the laws which may require inclusion and some have turned to inclusion in efforts to save scarce financial resources.

It seems that some school leaders feel that they are required to place all, or nearly all, children with disabilities in regular classrooms. The statutes that relate to the placement of such children do not incorporate the word "inclusion." The Individuals with Disabilities Act requires that a student be placed in the LRE (least restrictive environment) but does not require that all students with disabilities be placed in regular classroom settings. The nature of a child's disabilities should guide the IEP (Individualized Educational Program) team as it makes placement decisions. Another concern for the IEP team should be whether or not the child will have specified aids and support within the regular classroom. If provisions are not adequate within the regular classroom, the school district may be violating federal laws which require the implementation of the IEP as developed by the team.

There is also question as to whether or not there is a misunderstanding about the difference in required "mainstreaming," and the implied "inclusion." Mainstreaming of special education students has been a goal for the delivery of services for many years. Such placements have generally been made when there is reasonable evidence that indicates to the IEP team that a student will be able to perform required classroom tasks and ultimately earn satisfactory grades. Inclusion should be practiced when there is particular benefit to be derived by the student, but the benefit is often considered a social benefit, especially for severely disabled students, and is not related to successful classroom performance of on-level academic

tasks. It is the feeling of the writer that such placements should not produce a detrimental impact on the class situation; the impact should be neutral or positive.

It is easy to understand why school districts may be practicing inclusion as a means of saving dollars, but the impact (when negative) on regular classroom teachers and their students is being examined closely. Teachers and parents of "regular" students are beginning to speak out and question inclusion placements, especially of disruptive students.

Parents are saying that the issue should be about a safe environment, not about placing disabled students in a regular classroom environment (Roach, 1994).

Another major concern for the team, and the school district, should be relative to the teachers' preparation to instruct/accommodate such included students. Most "regular" classroom teachers have little preparation (often one 3 hour course relating to the exceptional child) for working on a regular basis with children who need special help. Teachers report being overwhelmed by children who may need intensive care and special accommodations, as they are also being asked to increase learning (improved test scores on norm referenced test), teach to each child relative to his/her individual learning style, wear rubber gloves while attending to small cuts or bloody noses, take money out of their own pocket to pay for lunch for a child who would not get to eat otherwise, control the behavior of "normal" children, embellish each child's self-esteem, (this could go on ad nauseam), and smile and be composed during the process.

An major concern for many teachers relates to students who exhibit disruptive behavior and may be emotionally disturbed. IEP teams should give special consideration to the impact such a child will have on the learning environment for other children in the classroom. If the learning of other students will be "significantly impaired" by the placement of a disruptive or "severely involved child," such a placement should not be considered. The "law" does not require such placement. The "law" does require the team to consider the degree to which the placement will disrupt the education of the other students.

Laws which relate to the suspension or expulsion of special students have often made it difficult for school districts to control disruptive behavior in disabled children and suspension beyond a 10 day period is unlawful. Schools must resort to obtaining a court order to exclude a disruptive student, but this "can" occur if they believe that keeping the student in their current educational placement will result in injury to that student or others. Such action is not something which school districts are anxious to take because of the likelihood that there could be further litigation and resulting financial obligations. Often such students and their parents are supported financially in their litigation pursuits by various advocacy groups.

Unfortunately, inclusion placements may be made for reasons other than to place children in their LRE. The IEP team members may experience pressure from program administrators to make placements which help schools with financial cost associated with ever-expanding programs for "special" students. Often, when such

placements are made, the teacher feels compelled to accept the responsibility, but may feel alienated because they do not feel comfortable with the assignment. They feel they must have the time, training, and extra help from knowledgeable staff members to make the inclusion process effective.

Teachers also say there may be a lack of communication between special educators and themselves as to how the included student will fit with the curricula and activities that have been planned. Teachers may be required to make major changes in plans to accommodate the included student and these changes may diminish opportunities and experiences that were previously planned for regular students.

It is interesting, indeed, that for many years the best delivery system for students with special needs was to provide individualized programs, that would be taught by specially prepared teachers, in a setting that was generally more personal, often within much smaller groupings or even on a on-on-one basis. When it was determined that these students could gain more from a less restrictive setting they were placed in that setting for an appropriate period of time. But much of their special education class time was dedicated to providing for the acquisition of specific skills and knowledge which would allow them to experience some degree of academic success; the ultimate goal being to allow them to fill roles in society as productive citizens. What we are seeing in inclusion efforts seems to be more of a focus on gaining social skills and establishing situations which do not provide the opportunities for learning enhancement that were provided in previous special education placements.

So, who wins and who loses? The writer feels that the following represents a reasonable summary and portrayal of the results of the inclusion of a disabled student (not necessarily disruptive) in a regular classroom setting.

Disabled Student - May make social gains by being included with regular students. (There are no guarantees that they will not be subject to ridicule and other mistreatment from their new classmates.) Academic and skill development may suffer because the regular teacher is not prepared and does not have the time to meet their unique personal and academic needs.

Regular Student - May gain understanding and appreciation of differences in people and their abilities (no guarantee). Academically they may suffer collectively or individually because their teacher must now divide energies to provide appropriate instruction and activities for the new student. There is not much chance that their academic learning opportunities will be enhanced.

School District - May gain financially if able to reduce special education staff. The district will probably find inclusion more costly if it provides adequate support, training, materials, etc. for the regular education teacher.

Special Education Teacher - May be unemployed or find that he/she is now a resource person and has given up ownership of her/his classroom setting. He/she will find it necessary to work with regular education teachers who do not have the same knowledge, skills and understandings they possess.

Regular Education Teacher - Will have to alter curricula and classroom activities to accommodate included student(s). This will take an investment of precious time and energy by many who are already overburdened. They may have to provide services they have not been trained to provide. They may find, with the inclusion of a disruptive student, they spend much of their time and energy in managing the included student.

Special Education Parent - May feel pleased that their child is associating with regular education students and is gaining important social skills. They may be concerned that their child is missing the special program that provided a trained teacher and smaller class sizes.

Regular Education Parent - Probably will be ambivalent about the placement of the disabled child, as long as the included child is not disruptive and does not detract from the previous academic opportunities provided their child.

The inclusion concept being advanced by many seems honorable in that proponents seem to be seeking to provide positive, growth producing experiences for included students, but the "law" does not require "inclusion." Perhaps it is time to revisit and enhance the concept of "mainstreaming."

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